

Officials, National Association of Development Disabilities Councils, National Association of Mental Health Planning & Advisory Councils, National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners, National Association of Protection and Advocacy Systems, National Association of Psychiatric Health Systems, National Association of School Nurses, National Association of School Psychologists.

National Association of Social Workers, National Association of State Directors of Special Education, National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors, National Center for Policy Research for Women & Families, National Center on Institutions and Alternatives, National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, National Coalition for the Homeless, National Coalition of Mental Health Consumers and Professionals, National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare, National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare, National Council of Jewish Women, National Council of La Raza, National Council on the Aging, National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, National Council on Family Relations, National Council on Problem Gambling, National Council on Suicide Prevention, National Down Syndrome Congress, National Down Syndrome Society, National Eating Disorders Association.

National Educational Alliance for Borderline Personality Disorder, National Education Association, National Exchange Club Foundation, National Foundation for Depressive Illness, National Health Council, National Health Law Program, National Hispanic Medical Association, National Hopeline Network, National Housing Conference, National Latino Behavioral Health Association, National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, National Leadership on African American Behavioral Health, National League of Cities, National Medical Association, National Mental Health Association, National Mental Health Awareness Campaign, National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help Clearinghouse, National Multiple Sclerosis Society, National Network for Youth, National Organization for Rare Disorders.

National Organization of People of Color Against Suicide, National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, National Osteoporosis Foundation, National Partnership for Women and Families, National PTA, National Recreation and Park Association, National Rural Health Association, National Schizophrenia Foundation, National Senior Citizens Law Center, National Therapeutic Recreation Society, National Treatment and Research Advancements Association for Personality Disorder, Native American Counseling Inc., Nebraska Medical Association, NETWORK, a Catholic Social Justice Lobby, Nevada State Medical Association, New Hampshire Medical Society, New Mexico Medical Society, NISH (National Industries for the Severely Handicapped), North American Association of Masters in Psychology, North Carolina Medical Society.

North Dakota Medical Association, Obsessive Compulsive Foundation, Office & Professional Employees International Union, Ohio State Medical Association, Oklahoma State Medical Association, Older Adult Consumer Mental Health Alliance, Oregon Medical Association, Organization of Student Social Workers, Partnership for Recovery, Pennsylvania Medical Society, People For the American Way, People With Disabilities Foundation, Physicians for Social Responsibility, Presbyterian Church (USA), Washington Office, Prevent Child Abuse America, Rebecca Project for Human Rights, Renfrew Center Foundation, Rhode Island Medical Society, Samaritans Suicide Prevention Center, School Social Work Association of America.

Screening for Mental Health, Inc., Service Employees International Union, Shaken Baby Alliance, Sjogren's Syndrome Foundation, Society for Adolescent Medicine, Society for Pediatric Research, Society for Personality Assessment, Society for Public Health Education, Society for Research on Child Development, Society for Social Work Research, Society for Women's Health Research, Society of American Gastrointestinal Endoscopic Surgeons, Society of Medical Consultants to Armed Forces, Society of Professors of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Society of Thoracic Surgeons, South Carolina Medical Association, South Dakota State Medical Association, STOP IT NOW!, Suicide Awareness Voice of Education, Suicide Prevention Action Network USA, Tennessee Medical Association.

Texas Medical Association, The Arc of the United States, Title II Community AIDS National Network, Tourette Syndrome Association, Treatment and Research Advancements Association for Personality Disorder, Union of American Hebrew Congregations, Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, United Cerebral Palsy Association, United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministry, United Jewish Communities, United Methodist General Board of Church and Society, Utah Medical Association, Vermont Medical Society, Volunteers of America, Washington State Medical Association, Wellstone Action, West Virginia State Medical Association, Wisconsin Medical Society, Working Assets, Women of Reform Judaism, Wyoming Medical Society, Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program, Youth Law Center.

MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, there will now be a period for the transaction of morning business up to the hour of 11:30 a.m., with the first half of the time under the control of the Democratic leader or his designee, and the second half of the time under the control of the majority leader or his designee.

Mr. REID. Mr. President, on behalf of Senator DASCHLE, I yield 10 minutes to Senator STABENOW, 10 minutes to Senator MURRAY, 10 minutes to Senator DURBIN, and 10 minutes to Senator WYDEN.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. THOMAS). Without objection, it is so ordered. The Senator from Michigan is recognized.

MENTAL HEALTH PARITY

Ms. STABENOW. Mr. President, I first wish to commend our leader, Senator DASCHLE, for his wonderful words regarding the need for mental health parity, and also join with both leaders in remembering Senator Paul Wellstone and his advocacy.

Nothing would be more fitting than to pass this long overdue legislation and dedicate it in his name.

HEALTH CARE

Ms. STABENOW. Mr. President, 24 years ago, Ronald Reagan was running for President and he asked each of us as Americans a question: Are you better off than you were 4 years ago?

It was the right question then, and it is the right question now. Are we better off than we were 4 years ago? This is a very important question. Unfortunately, for most middle-income Americans in 2004, the answer is clearly no.

What has happened in the last 4 years while wages have been flat, gas prices, college tuition, health care costs have skyrocketed, millions of jobs have been lost, poverty is on the rise, the budget surplus has been squandered, the Social Security trust fund has been raided, State taxes have risen, household debt has gone way up, consumer confidence has dropped, and the stock market has gone down.

We can look at a few of these areas with average weekly earnings flat at slightly over 1 percent; gas prices certainly in Michigan and around the country skyrocketing, going up and up; college tuition; family health care premiums—these are just three measures of what is happening to our families and what is commonly called the middle-class squeeze where families are not seeing their incomes go up, and yet all of the costs of providing opportunity for their children, of being able to meet the daily costs of living are going up and up.

Today I want to talk specifically about just one of those, and that is the family health care premiums. Since President Bush took office, family health care premiums have risen more than \$2,700. The average cost of a family plan is now above \$9,000. Workers have to pay about \$2,400 of that premium out of their own pockets, in addition to paying deductibles and copays.

That is a tremendous amount of money for most families, especially at a time when they are facing higher costs in so many other areas. Much of this increase has to do with the soaring cost of prescription drugs, which I have come to the Senate floor to speak about on many occasions. The cost of prescription drugs—and this is brand-name drugs—is rising at about three and a half times the rate of inflation. In fact, we know that for some of the top name-brand drugs we see advertised on television every day, they are actually rising anywhere from 8 to 10 to 12 percent faster than the rate of inflation, which is extraordinary.

The health care system and the business community paying the costs of health care premiums cannot continue to absorb that, and the Medicare prescription drug benefit does next to nothing to rein in escalating costs. In fact, researchers have suggested that the new Medicare law will actually result in new profits for the drug companies of \$139 billion over the next 8 years.

So here we are supposedly passing a bill to help seniors that one would hope would lower prices, but instead, because it does not allow Medicare to negotiate group discounts, it locks in up to 40 million people forced to pay the highest possible prices in the country,

resulting in \$139 billion in new profits over the next 8 years for the pharmaceutical industries and continual struggles for our seniors who literally are choosing between food and medicine.

When President Bush took office, the number of uninsured Americans had actually decreased for 2 straight years. The number of uninsured Americans had actually gone down for 2 straight years. But the dramatic increase in premiums during the Bush administration, combined with the loss of so many jobs, has left 3.8 million more Americans without health insurance. There are now nearly 44 million uninsured Americans, and the consequences are dire for these families and, I would argue, for communities and for businesses as well that end up seeing their health care premium dollars go up every time someone walks into the emergency room sicker than they should be, receiving inappropriate care and having the community hospital have to absorb and transfer that to the folks with insurance.

People without health insurance do not receive the care they need, as I indicated, to prevent or detect or treat serious medical problems. As a result, they are forced to live their lives in poorer health and die younger. Approximately 18,000 people die prematurely each year because they do not have health insurance.

We are the greatest country in the world. Shame on us if we cannot fix this. And we can fix it. It is just a matter of will. It is a matter of values and priorities. We need to turn things around and get this right.

So we come back again to President Reagan's famous question: Are you better off than you were 4 years ago? What has happened in the last 4 years? Again, wages have been flat, if not going down. In my State many folks are losing their jobs, and wages that are being replaced are actually lower. Gas prices are skyrocketing out of sight. College tuition, access to college and the American dream that we all want for our children, has gone up tremendously. Health care costs have skyrocketed, as I mentioned. As a result, our middle-income families are feeling squeezed more and more every day, and Americans are not better off. But we can be better off. We are the United States of America. We are the can-do country, and I know we can get back on track. With a few changes, with the right priorities, with the right values, we can turn this around. We have done it before and we can do it again.

With strong leadership and a real commitment to confronting the problems that families face, we can do better. We can provide our schools and teachers with the support they deserve. We can ensure that every qualified student has the opportunity to attend college. We can build a stronger America so every worker has access to health care and our seniors and the disabled truly have access to their prescription

drugs that they need at the lowest possible prices. We can restore the confidence of Americans that our better days are still ahead.

We have much to do. All of these facts, all of these issues, relate to choices, the choices we make as we govern about who we want to make sure is doing better in this country. We can choose between focusing on those things that help Americans, help the public to do better, or the special interests of this country. We need to turn it around so we are putting people first and we are addressing those things that allow each of us to have the opportunity for the great American dream. We are all about working hard, playing by the rules, and being able to go as far as one can possibly go in this great country if they are willing to do the work.

Too many folks are working hard and finding themselves more and more with costs and burdens that are stopping them from being able to fully obtain the American dream for themselves and their families. We are not better off right now, but we can be, and I am hopeful with the right kind of changes that we will be.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Washington.

STATE OF EDUCATION

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, I thank my colleague from Michigan for her excellent statement. I rise today to talk about the state of education in America today, and I want to pose a simple question, as my colleague from Michigan did: Are we better off than we were 4 years ago?

Let us look at the facts. Four years ago, we were making record investments in education. We were giving students, parents, and teachers the tools they needed to succeed. We focused on results and we got them. We focused on our classrooms and improved them. We focused on our students and we helped them on a path to lifetime learning.

Today, we find ourselves in very different circumstances. Today, the focus is on process, not on results. Today, the focus is on centralizing authority instead of the classroom. Instead of focusing on our students, the current administration is simply passing the buck.

During the Clinton administration, we focused on improving the economy and giving every American the tools they needed to succeed. We recorded the longest uninterrupted growth period in our Nation's history, and we helped the American people by getting the education, training, skills, and experience they needed to compete in a global economy. We created 26 million American jobs.

Today, it is a very different story. We are facing dismal budgets, unfunded mandates for our schools, and constant attacks on the programs that disadvantaged families rely on. Instead of help-

ing students, the administration has broken promises and failed to pay the Federal share for education. Let us start by looking at how this administration has underfunded the No Child Left Behind Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

We have seen programs that help students turn into unfunded mandates that burden our States. Over the past 4 years, States spent \$72 billion to cover the unfunded mandates in IDEA and No Child Left Behind. In my home State of Washington, IDEA is underfunded by \$746 million. No Child Left Behind is underfunded by \$408 million. That makes a difference in every classroom and in every child's life.

Two years ago, when we passed the No Child Left Behind Act, I voted for it. Most of us in Congress agreed that accountability is important and that we need to make sure our kids are learning the things they need to succeed, like reading, math, writing, and science. But the No Child Left Behind Act said in exchange for that new accountability, schools would get the funding they needed. Today the accountability has been imposed but the funding has not. In fact, Federal funding for the No Child Left Behind Act has fallen \$32 billion below the authorized levels since this act was signed into law.

I have visited schools in every corner of Washington State and I know firsthand that educators are working harder than ever to help their students meet these new accountability requirements. But today, as we all know, our State and local budgets are stretched so thin our local communities cannot afford to make up the differences between what our schools were promised and what this administration's budget proposal actually provides.

This year, the President's budget fell \$9.4 billion short of fully funding this law. President Bush has proposed the smallest increase for education funding in 9 years and he even proposed eliminating commonsense initiatives like dropout prevention. In Washington State alone, the difference between the President's request and the promise of No Child Left Behind means nearly 28,000 low-income students will be left behind. That number skyrockets to 4.6 million nationwide.

We can do better. That is why in fact I offered an amendment to the Senate budget resolution to fully fund that act. Regrettably my amendment failed on party-line votes.

When we passed the No Child Left Behind Act, Congress and the administration sidestepped the issues affecting our high schools. Our national high school graduation rate is an abysmal 69 percent. That number is even worse for students of color. Do you know roughly half of our minority students are graduating from high school? That means nearly half are dropping out. We need to keep better track of how minority students are doing by tracking dropout rates carefully. But today this Department of Education is not requiring